

# THE DARK COUNTRY OF DIVORCE



By Max Lucado

*It touches each of us, sooner or later. A friend, a brother, a co-worker, or perhaps, you. If you haven't been affected by divorce, you probably will be—it's one of the signatures of our society. In today's culture, divorce lurks and leers like a predator surveying his prey.*

*What does God say about divorce?*

*What scripture-based counsel is available for those whose hearts have been broken by divorce? For those considering divorce, what guides can keep them committed to the marriage?*

*As we study this painful topic together, remember this: God hates divorce. But—the same God who hates divorce, loves the divorced, just as He does all his children. If you're contemplating divorce, I pray you'll reconsider reconciliation, if at all possible. If your heart has been broken by divorce, go to Him for healing. If divorce has separated you from God, I pray that you will find your way back to Him.*

*He's left the light on. The door is unlocked. He's waiting for you.*

Chapter One

# TYING A KNOT AND HANGING ON

In the hallway of my memory hangs a photograph. It's a picture that I treasure very much. A picture of two people—a man and a woman, a couple in the seventh decade of life.

The man lies in the hospital bed. But the hospital bed is in the living room, not in the hospital room.

His body, for all practical purposes, is useless. Muscles have been so ravaged by disease that they're stretched from bone to bone like the taut fabric on the spokes of an umbrella.

The man breathes through a hose attached to a hole in the base of his throat. And though his body is ineffective, his eyes are sparkling—and they search the room.

They search the room, looking for his partner, a woman whose age is concealed by her youthful vigor. Though her hair is gray, she's vibrant and healthy, in contrast to the figure lying in the bed.

She energetically goes about her task of the day: taking care of her husband. With unswerving loyalty, she does what she's been doing for the past two years. It's not an easy assignment: she has to shave him, bathe him, feed him, comb his hair, brush his teeth.

She holds his hand as they sit and watch television together.

She gets up in the middle of the night and suction his lungs.

She leans over and kisses his feverish face.

What a precious picture it is. It's precious because it's a portrait of my own mom and dad.

Some would say it's a tragic picture of what disease can do to a man's body. And while that's true, it's a glorious reminder of what devotion can do to a couple's marriage.

By the time God called my father home, my parents had been married over 40 years. A lot can happen in 40 years. Married during the Depression. Four children, three tonsillectomies, 16 years of college tuition, over a dozen job transfers. Six years in which one would work the morning shift and one would work the evening shift so the kids wouldn't be left alone.

Forty years offers plenty of reasons to give up on marriage. More than enough excuses to walk out. Not only did they live through one World War, they probably endured 100 domestic wars as well. So what was it that gave their marriage “staying power”? Once, a few months prior to his death, I asked my father what had kept the two of them together.

He said, “Well, leaving was never an option.”

### **Leaving was never an option.**

What they had was a forever marriage—a marriage in which two people, eyeball-to-eyeball, say *I’m going to love you when I don’t feel like loving you. I’m going to love you when you’re sick. When we have money and when we don’t. I’m going to love you forever.*

Marriage demands the greatest level of tenacity and talent and tenderness that any human being can summon. How bizarre that two people could stand up before a group of folks, gaze into each other’s eyes, and promise to ride the roller coaster of life together. It’s zany, unbelievable, and yet it’s God’s plan. The institution of the home is God’s idea. When God made man and realized that His creation was lonely, He went to work, creating a companion for him. He brought the two of them together in that first beautiful wedding. Giraffes were the bridesmaids and the lions were the groomsmen.

They all marched down that tree lined aisle carpeted with pine needles. And God Himself joined the two together.

Yet, since that first wedding, marriage has fallen on hard times. Somewhere along the line, instead of an honored institution blessed by God, marriage has become an option for some and a passing fancy for others.

Nobody ever said marriage is easy. It’s been said that a wedding is an event, but marriage is an achievement. It takes patience and caring and giving and giving and giving.

Sometimes that knot will be like a smooth silk ribbon wrapped around a little girl’s pony tail. But there will be other times when it will be like trying to loop a huge hank of rope-scratchy, itchy, weighing you down.

This knot has a name—it’s called “commitment.”

## **THE COVENANT OF COMPANIONSHIP**

Why is the marriage commitment so important to God? It may help to remember that ours is a God of covenants. Marriage is a covenant commitment—and covenant commitments are a part of God’s fabric. That’s who He is. He’s the God who looked at Abraham and promised, “I will bless you.” He’s the God who looked at the children of Israel and pledged, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” He’s the God who stood on the ascension hill and said, “I will be with you always, until the end of the earth.”

The marriage vow, a covenant of companionship, begins by separating ourselves from our parents and uniting with our mate. Becoming one flesh as the marriage is consummated unites the couple physically, mentally, and emotionally (God’s dream for each couple is a covenant.).

Divorce is not God’s idea. Divorce was not created by God. Divorce was a toleration of God. Remember when the Jews questioned Jesus about divorce? “Jesus answered, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because you refused to accept God’s teaching, but divorce was not allowed in the beginning. I tell you that anyone who

divorces his wife and marries another woman is guilty of adultery. The only reason for a man to divorce his wife is if his wife has sexual relations with another man” (Mt. 19:8-9).

When we violate the covenant of marriage, we violate what God has called us to be. “The Lord God of Israel says, ‘I hate divorce...so be careful. And do not break your trust’” (Mal. 2:16).

Easier said than done.

*Don’t you understand, God? I walk into my house and it’s like walking into a war zone. I’d rather stay at work than go home on Friday afternoons...*

*Our house is so full of tension we could slice it with a knife. How in the world do you expect me to honor that type of covenant?...*

How does God answer such a question? By saying: *I expect it of you because I have honored that type of covenant with you!*

To understand the importance God places on covenants, read Gen. 15:1-21. The scene is a wedding ceremony, if you will, between God and his people. God promises to bless Abram with many children. Then God sets the stage for sealing the covenant. He instructs Abram to prepare some animals and birds.

The ceremony consisted of taking two animals, cutting them in half, and setting the carcasses apart, forming a path. Traditionally, the first party to the covenant would walk the path between the carcasses, saying “May what has happened to these animals happen to me if I fail to uphold my covenant.” Then the other party would do the same, carrying a torch and a smoking pot, repeating the same pledge. In the account of God’s covenant with Abram, the man awoke to see a torch and smoking pot passing through the carcasses. God was sealing the covenant between Him and Abram.

Remarkable. God making a covenant with man. Over and over, God would honor that covenant:

When the children of Israel complained in bondage, God did not leave them.

When He delivered them and they wanted to go back to Egypt, He did not leave them.

When they made a golden calf and worshipped it, God didn’t leave them.

When their King David lied, cheated, and committed adultery and murder, God didn’t leave them.

When His own friends fell asleep while He agonized in prayer at Gethsemane, He didn’t leave.

When His own follower placed a kiss of betrayal on His cheek, He didn’t leave.

When a Roman soldier made raw meat out of his back with a whip, Jesus didn’t leave.

When the spikes sent roaring pain through His body, Jesus didn’t leave.

When He came back from the grave and found his apostles huddling together in fear, He didn't leave them.

That is the kind of God we serve. A God of covenant. That is why covenant promises are important to God. A God who believes that a covenant pledge is a covenant to be honored. As a child of God, that is our heritage. A heritage that calls you to be faithful, not just to God, but to your spouse. If your marriage needs rebuilding, you have a God who charges you to call on Him to help rebuild your home.

One of the last messages my father ever gave me was scribbled on a piece of paper as he lay in his hospital bed. "Max, be faithful to your wife."

We have a heritage of faithfulness. There's no greater reason to be faithful to your spouse than to honor the God who has been faithful to you.

## Chapter Two

# THE DARK COUNTRY OF DIVORCE

From 1960 to 1980, the number of divorces in our century doubled. In 1980, predictions estimated the rate of divorce to double again by the turn of the century. Why?

To understand this crisis of society, let's take a look at community charges that have affected the family. We have seen a deterioration in the community ties that once were instrumental in the support of the family. There was a time of family accountability. A day in which grandma and grandpa lived down the road, mom and dad were a block away, cousins were scattered around town. Divorce was rare, something out of the ordinary, even considered scandalous.

But those days have passed. Today we often don't even know our neighbors, much less hold ourselves accountable to them.

Today the average American lives 150 miles away from the nearest relative and moves once every four years. The result? Every time we uproot, we find ourselves in a new situation, increasingly anonymous in the world.

This anonymity is the seed of lessened accountability. You move to New York City or San Francisco or Houston, and no one knows you. You walk through a mall and nobody stops to say hello. You're anonymous. Anonymity becomes appealing because along with the decrease of recognition comes a decrease of accountability. No one cares what you do, so it doesn't seem to matter so much what you do.

So, in our society, lessened accountability and increased anonymity have contributed to the explosion of divorce. Our attitudes have changed: what was once a rare and scandalous is now acceptable and common. But God's teaching hasn't changed. It's very clear on the subject: God hates divorce. He has honored his covenant with us and expects us to do the same. God hates divorce. But scripture is equally clear: *God loves the divorced*. Divorce is not a sin above sins, but a sin among sins. There is never a place from which we can't start over. There is never a place so far from God that He can't draw us back to Him.

## KEEPING THE TENSION TENSE

God loves the divorced but hates divorce. Oh, how we tend to go from one extreme to the other. On one hand we preach the anger of God toward those who fail and elevate divorce as *the sin above sins* (which it's not).

The result is a battered and bruised people wondering if God ever has a place for them again. Or, in our efforts to be compassionate toward the battered and bruised, we go overboard in giving them compassion. Observers note this compassion and think "If divorce is that easy, then why stay married?"

But the tension must remain tense. God hates divorce. He hates it because it destroys the children whom he loves. But let us be as equally loud and clear and state that God *loves the divorced*, that it is not a sin among sins. The same God who will forgive your bad attitude or bad temper can forgive a bad decision in marriage.

The teaching of God is very clear. Perhaps it's the listening of man that's fuzzy. Look what God says on the subject:

*Some Pharisees came to Jesus and tried to test Him. They asked, "Is it right for a man to divorce his wife for any reason he chooses?"*

*Jesus answered, "Surely you have read in the Scriptures: When God made the world, he made them male and female. And God said, 'So a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife and the two will become one body. So there are not two, but one. God has joined the two together, so no one should separate them.'"*

*The Pharisee asked, "Why then did Moses give a command for a man to divorce his wife by giving her divorce papers?"*

*Jesus answered, "Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because you refused to accept God's teaching, but divorce was not allowed in the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman is guilty of adultery. The only reason for a man to divorce his wife is if his wife has sexual relations with another man."*

*The followers said to him, "If that is the only reason a man can divorce his wife, it is better not to marry."*

*Jesus answered, "Not everyone can accept his teaching, but God has made some able to accept it. There are different reasons why some men cannot marry. Some men were born without the ability to become fathers. Others were made that way later in life by other people. And some may have given up marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. But the person who can marry should accept this teaching about marriage."*

*The people brought their little children to Jesus so he could put his hands on them and pray for them. His followers told them to stop, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to people who are like these children." After Jesus put his hands on the children, he left there" (Mt. 19:3-15 NIV).*

As you wrestle with the dilemma of divorce, keep these three truths in mind:

God values people. Underneath every theological or doctrinal teaching his abiding truth. And because He values us, God's law exist, not for our pleasure, but for our protection. We are His possession. We belong to Him. We are His children.

God values covenants. God is a covenant God. When God states something, He does it. He is honest. He doesn't back away. He's committed to it. God has always based His relationship with people upon a promise. He lives according to a promise, not according to a system or rule book.

God knows that broken covenants break people. If I tell you I'm going to do something, and I don't do it, something inside of you breaks. If I fail to keep a promise to my daughters, they will look at me and say, "But daddy, you promised." A promise is

all we've got. God knows that since everything is built on a promise, when a promise is broken, hearts are broken.

## DIVORCE IS WAR

If you've been through a divorce or if you've witnessed a divorce, you know what broken people look and feel like. Divorce causes us to say things and do things that we would have thought unspeakable and unacceptable. Divorce is war. A territorial war. A cold war. A verbal war. A physical war. But it's a war. And in every war, there are wounds and fatalities. It's a tragedy.

Are you considering divorce? Please, rethink your plan. Give the marriage everything you've got. Try your very best. If you've already done that, give it one more shot. Go not just the second mile, but the fifth and the tenth and the hundredth miles. Begin viewing divorce as not just an option, but as the last ditch, final move.

Nurture the marriage. Remember the original plan. Keep it alive. And never, never underestimate the pain of a broken marriage.

Remember that God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). Divorce is not the sin above sins. It is a sin. It's wrong. But it's forgivable.

Are you happily married? Be compassionate toward those who aren't. If there is someone in your church or your circle of friends who has been divorced, do your part to take away the stigma.

Are you divorced? Then seek God's healing mercy. Repent and start over. You've been wounded in battle, but God can bring beauty out of that pain. He has done it before; He will do it again. Perhaps the pain you've experienced has equipped you to minister to others in pain.

What's the bottom line on divorce?

What does God want us to do?

**If you are married, God wants you to stay married.** When you marry, you make a covenant before God. And he wants you to honor that covenant.

**If you are separated, God wants you to do everything possible to be reconciled to your mate.**

Understandably, it may not be possible. Circumstances may be beyond your ability to intercede. However, ours is a God of reconciliation. The God who brought an estranged humanity into relationship with the heavenly Father has the power to reunite separated couples.

Not only is He the God who creates, He is the God who can *recreate* and He wants to *recreate* your marriage and your life. He's a God who wants to work within your home and do what you think is impossible.

**If you are divorced, in opposition to scripture,** reconcile with your mate. If it is not possible, then accept God's grace and move forward. Seek to live a life pleasing to God from this point on.



God is a merciful God. Can God forgive anger, gossip, malice. He is a merciful God. He's the God who had mercy on the adulterous woman. He's a God who not only forgave but commissioned the Samaritan woman who had been in and out of five different broken homes. Is He a God of mercy? Yes!

Whether you're struggling with a potential divorce, or you're enduring the pain of divorce, God wants to guide you out of that dark country.

Take His hand and leave the dark country of divorce for the new horizon on the mountaintop.

## Chapter Three

# BROKEN HEART, MENDED FAITH

The fog of the broken heart. It's a dark fog that slyly imprisons the soul and refuses easy escape. It's a heavy cloud that honors no hour and respects no person. Depression, discouragement, disappointment, doubt...all are companions of this dreaded presence.

The fog of the broken heart disorients our life. It makes it hard to see the road. Dim your lights. Wipe off the windshield. Slow down. Do what you wish, nothing helps. When this fog encircles us, our vision is blocked and tomorrow is a forever away. When this billowy blackness envelopes us, the most earnest words of help and hope are but vacant phrases.

If you have ever been betrayed by a friend, you know what I mean. If you have ever been dumped by a spouse or abandoned by a parent, you have seen this fog. If you have ever placed a spade of dirt on a loved one's casket or kept vigil at a dear one's bedside, you, too, recognize this cloud.

If you have been in this fog, or are in it now, you can be sure of one thing-you are not alone. Even the saltiest of sea captains have lost their bearings because of the appearance of this unwanted cloud. Like the comedian said, "If broken hearts were commercials, we'd all be on TV."

Think back over the last two or three months. How many broken hearts did you encounter? How many wounded spirits did you witness? How many stories of tragedy did you read about?

My own reflection is sobering:

The woman who lost her husband and son in a freak car wreck.

The attractive mother of three who was abandoned by her husband.

The child who was hit and killed by a passing garbage truck as he was getting off the school bus. His mother, who was waiting for him, witnessed the tragedy.

The parents who found their teenager dead in the forest behind their home. He had hung himself from a tree with his own belt.

The list goes on and on, doesn't it? Foggy tragedies. How they build our vision and destroy our dreams. Forget any great hopes of reaching the world. Forget any plans of changing society. Forget any aspirations of moving mountains. Forget all that. Just help me make it through the night!

The suffering of the broken heart.

Go with me for a moment to witness what was perhaps the foggiest night in history. The scene is very simple; you'll recognize it quickly. A grove of twisted olive trees. Ground cluttered with large rocks. A low stone fence. A dark, dark night.

Now, look into the picture. Look closely through the shadowy foliage. See that person? See that solitary figure? What's he doing? Flat on the ground. Face stained with dirt and tears. Fists pounding the hard earth. Eyes wide with a stupor of fear. Hair matted with salty sweat. Is that blood on his forehead?

That's Jesus. Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.

Maybe you've seen the classic portrait of Christ in the garden. Kneeling beside a big rock. Snow-white robe. Hands peacefully folded in prayer. A look of serenity on his face. Halo over his head. A spotlight from heaven illuminating his golden-brown hair.

Now, I'm not an artist, but I can tell you one thing. The man who painted that picture didn't use the gospel of Mark as a pattern. Look what Mark wrote about that painful night.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James, and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will. Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for an hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"<sup>1</sup>

Look at those phrases. "*Horror and dismay* came over him." "My heart is ready to *break* with grief." "He went a little forward and *threw* himself on the ground."

Does this look like the picture of a saintly Jesus resting in the palm of God? Hardly. Mark used black paint to describe this scene. We see a "man of sorrows."<sup>2</sup> We see a man struggling with fear, wrestling with commitments, and yearning for relief.

We see a Jesus in the fog of a broken heart.

The writer of Hebrews would later pen, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with *loud cries and tears* to the one who could save him from death."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:32-42, NIV

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 53:3, NIV

My, what a portrait! Jesus is in pain. Jesus is on the stage of fear. Jesus is cloaked, not in sainthood, but in humanity.

The next time the fog finds you, you might do well to remember Jesus in the garden. The next time you think that no one understands, reread the fourteenth chapter of Mark. The next time your self-pity convinces you that no one cares, pay a visit to Gethsemane. And the next time you wonder if God really perceives the pain that prevails on this dusty planet, listen to him pleading among the twisted trees.

Here's my point. Seeing God like this does wonders for our own suffering. God was never more human than at this hour. God was never nearer to us than when he hurt. The Incarnation was never so fulfilled as in the garden.

As a result, time spent in the fog of pain could be God's greatest gift. It could be the hour that we finally see our Maker. If it is true that in suffering God is most like man, maybe in our suffering we can see God like never before.

If you're drifting in the fog of divorce, remember: this time of suffering maybe the closest you'll ever get to God. Watch closely. It could very well be that the hand that extends itself to lead you out of the fog is a pierced one.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 5:7, NIV, italics mine.

# STUDY GUIDE

## Chapter One

### Tying a Knot and Hanging On

1. What does Max mean when he says: “Leaving was never an option”?
2. “A wedding is an event, but marriage is an achievement.” Has your marriage been an achievement? Why? Why not? Think of a couple whose marriage would be considered an achievement. What are some characteristics that stand out?
3. Why is the covenant of marriage so important to God?
4. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce, what was his response (Mt. 19:13-15)?

## Chapter Two

### The Dark Country of Divorce

1. What are some causes of divorce “explosion” in America?
2. For what reasons does God permit divorce?
3. Malachi 2:16 says God hates divorce. What significance does that have for divorced people? How does He feel about them?

## Chapter Three

### Broken Heart, Mended Faith

1. Think of some broken hearts you have known. Have they moved toward healing?
2. Has your heart been broken? Has it caused you to separate yourself from God? If so, what brought you back into a relationship with Him?
3. Read Isaiah 53:3. Who is the one referred to here? Can you relate to his broken heart?

**The Dark Country of Divorce**

Published by UpWords Ministry

© 1996 by Max Lucado

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

“Broken Heart, Mended Faith” from

No Wonder They Call Him the Savior © 1986 by Multnomah Press

Printed in the United States of America

This electronic copy of *The Dark Country of Divorce* is brought to you by UpWords, the ministry of Max Lucado. UpWords is a non-profit ministry that exists because of the generosity of people like you. It is our prayer that this ministry will continue to encourage the lives of those who seek a deeper relationship with the Lord. If this material has been beneficial to your spiritual life, Please prayerfully consider contributing to our ministry with prayer and financial support.

For information about UpWords’ radio, online and tape ministries featuring Max Lucado, Or to contribute to UpWords, write:

UpWords

PO Box 692170

San Antonio, TX 78269-2170

1-800-822-9673

Or visit [www.maxlucado.com](http://www.maxlucado.com)